

## “Economization” of Social Work – The need for theoretical perspectives and research approaches

The topic of my presentation today is “Economization” of Social Work – the need for theoretical perspectives and research approaches. Considering the fact that this field of research is a very large one, especially if the debates on neoliberalism in international contexts are considered as being very similar, I will focus today on two aspects: First, I will take a look at the meaning of the buzzword “economization” in academic discourse. Therefore, I am identifying three premises that form the basis of economization. I will then briefly outline its problematic effects which are discussed within the field of social work. Finally, I will focus on the question: Which research approaches are available for analyzing these changes, both critically and self-reflexively?

### 1. Three premises on economization

The term "economization" is mainly used in the German-speaking social sciences and humanities. It addresses and increasingly criticizes the growing influence of economic criteria and economic instruments in different fields of society, like in education (Höhne 2012), politics (Schaal/Lemke/Ritzi 2014), nursing care (Auth 2013), social work (Kessl 2018), etc. Some critiques refer to economization of society as a whole (Schimank/Volkman 2017).

There are at least 3 main premises which form the basis of economization:

- 1) Economization is a transformation towards a particular form of rationality. The argument here is that different fields of society have always been indirectly dependent on economic criteria, but as business economics is becoming the *dominant* field, the logic of action changes and is valued mainly by the criteria of efficiency, marketability and competition. (depicted as the core elements of economization)
- 2) Economization can be seen as a hegemony of specific political economic discourses with transforming influence in social relations and structures, self-descriptions of institutions and professionals, and governing forms. In this regard, the changes in semantics and discourses can be seen as a precondition for the changing of structures.
- 3) Economization is an indication of a fundamental transformation of the relationship between the state/politics, economics/market, civil- (society) and the respective field(s) of research. (see also Tomic Hensel 2019).

Using the notions of *change*, *transformation* and *shift* includes the presumption that there is a period before and after economization (Höhne 2015). Although it is not a new term (see Manzeschke 2011), economization has been increasingly used since the 1990s to criticize the growing politics of privatization and deregulation. In the field of Social Work, this shift is often described as a shift from the welfare state to an “activating workfare state” (Dimmel 2007, p. 31). Those terms are used to highlight the increasing link between social politics and the (labor) market. This link is explicitly described in the actual report on social politics in Austria: Social benefits, like minimum benefit systems ... serve “primarily as a bridge to rapid reintegration into the labor market. [...] The positive performance of Austria as an important economic hotspot and stable labor market is one of our stated goals. [...] Therefore there is a need for “sustainable and efficient arrangements of social services.” (BMASGK 2018, p. 3-4)

In this regard, Social politics can be considered as a part of the competition politics in the global market. Unemployment is not considered a social problem but individual responsibility. ... The problem here is that, in political contexts, social inclusion is often being equated with inclusion in the labor market (Dimmel 2006, S. 26). This equalization has its blind spot in the fact that not all people have the same opportunities to participate in the “free” (labor) market. Focusing on performance and employability tends to perpetuate the already existing social inequalities (Tomic Hensel 2019, S. 61-62). It is also neglecting the fact that – throughout the politically-forced deregulation and flexibilization – there has been a rise in atypical employment forms and people who remain poor even though they have regular employment, the so called “working poor” (Dimmel 2006, p. 26).

Not only are the transformations increasing social inequalities, but focusing on efficiency, marketability and competition as new governing forms tend to make it more difficult for professionals to assure the quality of their work. Schuhmayer and Walzl sum up the problem as a part of the results of their research on economization of social work: “High-Quality and professional work should be carried out with less financial means and under insufficient conditions, but with increased demands at the same time.”(Schuhmayer / Walzl 2010, p. 8). (This is what fits perfectly into the policy of “efficient arrangement of social services” stated in the latest report mentioned before.) In the end, focusing on efficiency leads to the de-professionalization of Social Work, or so Bakic (2008) concludes.

Although there is less doubt about ongoing economization, as particular fall cases show (look at [sozialearbeit.at](http://sozialearbeit.at)), there *is* still a lack of empirical research in the field of social work. In the

following, I will identify one essential gap and make suggestions for research perspectives referring to the regulation approach and the approach of “Involvement”.

## 2. The Regulation approach and the “Involvement”-approach

As outlined before, social policies in Austria seem to be increasingly linked to employment and considered as a part of national competitiveness. Although the interactions between state, market and different fields of society have been noted in many research papers as crucial for understanding economization processes (like I mentioned in the 3rd premise), they are still a blind spot in empirical research.

The Regulation approach could be helpful in analyzing these developments, as it provides a wide theoretical background on the transformations of the welfare state. Regulationists argue that the decline of the welfare state doesn't mean, there is less state regulation, but rather that the techniques of regulation change in order to ensure capital accumulation (it means they have to make a certain amount of profit to stay competitive). It is outlined that there is nothing like perfect markets (Jessop/Sum 2006) or a self-regulating market (like neoclassical concepts suggest; MTH), but rather that political regulation is needed to install markets and create competition (Hirsch 2005, p. 150). The shift in regulation is mostly specified as the transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism, where “the primacy of the nation state was being gradually undermined.” It is argued that “the denationalisation of the state in favor of economic globalisation resulted into a series of deregulation policies”, which included the privatizations and “flexibilisation” in many fields of production and labour.” (Markantonatou 2007, p. 122). The concepts of regulation have been developed to explain and explore a “wide range of institutional factors and social forces directly and indirectly *involved*” (Jessop/Sum 2006, p. 4) in boosting efficiency and competitiveness. Hirsch points out that the increased significance of extra-economic institutions and practices in capital accumulation processes is closely connected to the economization of different fields of society (Hirsch 2005, p. 157).

The national welfare state in this sense is becoming an internationalized (Hirsch 2005, p. 154), competitive state, whose new purpose is to “make society fit for competition.” (Genschel/Seelkopf 2014, p. 234) In this regard, the purpose of social services is to help promote or restore the employability of unemployed and welfare recipients,” as Dahme/Wohlfahrt (o.J., p. 6) conclude (see also Jessop 2002, p. 152). As social work is a part of social policies – or speaking in the regulation approach's terms “an extra-economic institution,” it has – therefore – to raise the question of its own involvement in these processes. In this sense, SW should not only be seen and analyzed solely as an object of economic

transformations (Diebäcker/Hammer 2009), but its role in adopting business economic criteria also has to be reflected.

Acknowledging these concerns, Kessl stresses that: The market-oriented reconstruction of institutions of social work and the employability-oriented curricula in Social Work studies are based on decisions *made also by those responsible within welfare and the universities* (Kessl 2018, p. 1638).

Therefore I would argue, - and here I refer to the educational scientist Astrid Messerschmidt (2009) – that there is no place for absolute opposition, where Social Workers can retire. The challenge in researching the effects of economization is rather to make its own involvement in reproducing the discourses and practices of economization a starting point in research. That means that SW has to deal with economization both *critically and self-reflexively*. The involvement approach could help in questioning its own complicity in the structures of dominance and power and their share in reproducing the discourses and practices of economization.

Taking one's own ambivalent position of being “in between” into account could help in exploring alternative ways of dealing with economized structures and in exploring possibilities of resistance (Kessl 2018). Dimmel marks this as a *grey area*, where social workers have a range between decisions based on principles of Social Work and structures that require economic efficiency (Dimmel 2007, p. 30-31). This research focus could also help bring Social Work more into the political debates (see also Diebäcker/Hammer 2009), as a literature review shows that in social politics voices of social work are hardly been heard (Dimmel 2006, p. 2).

### 3. Outlook

Instead of a conclusion, I would like to give an outlook on the grasp of the discourses on Economization so far: they have not only been marginalized in political contexts (Dimmel 2006, p. 2), but they also hardly reach outside of the German-speaking world. Research approaches with an emphasis on regulation could be helpful in framing and exploring economic transformations as global transformations and to affiliate them with the international critical debates on neoliberalism – as they have mostly the same object of critique. In this sense, research collaborations could help us to depict and criticize the adoption of economized policies in social work and to explore possibilities of resistance on the global level, as social security and social justice are global concerns. One pivotal reference point – and this is my closing thesis – could be the Global Agenda, whose aim is to “strengthen the profile [...] of social work [...],

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to acquire new partnerships [...] and to enable social workers to make a stronger contribution to policy development".<sup>1</sup>

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Marina Tomic Hensel, presentation at the ifsw european conference “social protection and human dignity”, Vienna 2019, 10.9.2019

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Marina Tomic Hensel, presentation at the ifsw european conference “social protection and human dignity”, Vienna 2019, 10.9.2019

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